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(54) NANBV diagnostics and vaccines.

(57) A new virus, Hepatitis C virus (HCV), which has proven to be the major etiologic agent of blood-borne NANBH, was discovered by Applicant. The initial work on this virus, which includes a partial genomic sequence of the prototype HCV isolate, is described in EPO Pub. No. 318,216, and PCT Pub. No. WO/89/04669. The present invention, which in part is based on new HCV sequences and polypeptides which are not disclosed in the above-cited publications, includes the application of these new sequences and polypeptides in immunoassays, probe diagnostics, anti-HCV antibody production, PCR technology, and recombinant DNA technology. Included within the invention also are novel immunogenic polypeptides encoded within clones containing HCV cDNA, novel methods for purifying an immuncgenic HCV polypeptide, and antisense polynucleotides derived from HCV cDNA.

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conditions described supra. for the expression of the fusion polypeptide, C100-3. The resulting polypeptides are screened using the sera from individuals with NANBH, described supra. for the screening of immunogenic polypeptides encoded in HCV cDNAs expressed in E. coli.

Comparison of the Hydrophobic Profiles of HCV Polyproteins with West Nile Virus Polyprotein and with Dengue Virus NS1

The hydrophobicity profile of an HCV polyprotein segment was compared with that of a typical Flavivirus, West Nile virus. The polypeptide sequence of the West Nile virus polyprotein was deduced from the known polynucleotide sequences encoding the non-structural proteins of that virus. The HCV polyprotein sequence was deduced from the sequence of overlapping cDNA clones. The profiles were determined using an antigen program which uses a window of 7 amino acid width (the amino acid in question, and 3 residues on each side) to report the average hydrophobicity about a given amino acid residue. The parameters giving the reactive hydrophobicity for each amino acid residue are from Kyte and Doolittle (1982). Fig. 19 shows the hydrophobic profiles of the two polyproteins; the areas corresponding to the non-structural proteins of West Nile virus, ns1 through ns5, are indicated in the figure. As seen in the figure, there is a general similarity in the profiles of the HCV polyprotein and the West Nile virus polyprotein.

The sequence of the amino acids encoded in the 5′-region of HCV cDNA shown in Fig. 16 has been compared with the corresponding region of one of the strains of Dengue virus, described supra., with respect to the profile of regions of hydrophobicity and hydrophilicity (data not shown). This comparison indicated that the polypeptides from HCV and Dengue encoded in this region, which corresponds to the region encoding NS1 (or a portion thereof), have a similar hydrophobic/hydrophilic profile.

The similarity in hydrophobicity profiles, in combination with the previously identified homologies in the amino acid sequences of HCV and Dengue Flavivirus in EP 0,218,316 suggests that HCV is related to these members of the Flavivirus family.

Characterization of the Putative Polypeptides Encoded Within the HCV ORF

The sequence of the HCV cDNA sense strand, shown in Fig. 17, was deduced from the overlapping HCV cDNAs in the various clones described in EPO Pub. No. 318,216 and those described supra. It may be deduced from the sequence that the HCV genome contains primarily one long continuous ORF, which encodes a polyprotein. In the sequence, nucleotide number 1 corresponds to the first nucleotide of the initiator MET codon; minus numbers indicate that the nucleotides are that distance away in the 5′-direction (upstream), while positive numbers indicate that the nucleotides are that distance away in the 3′-direction (downstream). The composite sequence shows the "sense" strand of the HCV cDNA.

The amino acid sequence of the putative HCV polyprotein deduced from the HCV cDNA sense strand sequence is also shown in Fig. 17, where position 1 begins with the putative initiator methionine.

Possible protein domains of the encoded HCV polyprotein, as well as the approximate boundaries, are the following (the polypeptides identified within the parentheses are those which are encoded in the Flavivirus domain):

Putative Domain	Approximate Boundary (amino acid nos.)
"C" (nucleocapsid protein)	1-120
"E" (Virion envelope protein(s) and possibly matrix (M) proteins	120-400
"NS1" (complement fixation antigen?)	400-660
"NS2" (unknown function)	660-1050
"NS3" (protease?)	1050-1640
"NS4" (unknown function)	1640-2000
"NS5" (polymerase)	2000-? end

It should bo noted, however, that hydrophobicity profiles (described infra), indicate that HCV diverges from the Flavivirus model, particularly with respect to the region upstream of NS2. Moreover, the boundaries indicated are not intended to show firm demarcations between the putative polypeptides.

The Hydrophilic and Antigenic Profile of the Polypeptide

Profiles of the hydrophilicity/hydrophobicity and the antigenic index of the putative polyprotein encoded in the HCV cDNA sequence shown in Fig. 16 were determined by computer analysis. The program for hydrophilicity/hydrophobicity was as described supra. The antigenic index results from a computer program which relies on the following criteria: 1) surface probability, 2) prediction of alpha-helicity by two different methods; 3) prediction of beta-sheet regions by two different methods; 4) prediction of U-turns by two different methods; 5) hydrophilicity/hydrophobicity; and flexibility. The traces of the profiles generated by the computer analyses are shown in Fig. 20. In the hydrophilicity profile, deflection above the abscissa indicates hydrophilicity, and below the abscissa indicates hydrophobicity. The probability that a polypeptide region is antigenic is usually considered to increase when there is a deflection upward from the abscissa in the hydrophilic and/or antigenic profile. It should be noted, however, that these profiles are not necessarily indicators of the strength of the immunogenicity of a polypeptide.

Identification of Co-linear Peptides in HCV and Flaviviruses

The amino acid sequence of the putative polyprotein encoded in the HCV cDNA sense strand was compared with the known amino acid sequences of several members of Flaviviruses. The comparison shows that homology is slight, but due to the regions in which it is found, it is probably significant. The conserved colinear regions are shown in Fig. 21. The amino acid numbers listed below the sequences represent the number in the putative HCV polyprotein (See Fig. 17.)

The spacing of these conserved motifs is similar between the Flaviviruses and HCV, and implies that there is some similarity between HCV and these flaviviral agents.

The following listed materials are on deposit under the terms of the Budapest Treaty with the American Type Culture Collection (ATCC), 12301 Parklawn Dr., Rockville, Maryland 20852, and have been assigned the following Accession Numbers.